

# By design

Having redesigned a house near Uzès and several other properties in southern France, **Ginny Blackwell** shares her own top tips and those of her project partners



I bought my first property in France in October 1998, a lovely old Dordogne farmhouse, surrounded by fields of sunflowers and vineyards. I vividly remember the elation I felt when breaking the news to family and friends in Oregon.

“You’re not going to believe what we’ve done! Take a look at our video...” About four months later, a harsher reality struck when we arrived on a cold February day to find three pieces of furniture in the house: a musty old couch, one card table and a set of chairs.

Since then, I’ve been responsible for 13 more remodelling and decorating projects in the south of France, Umbria and the Cotswolds. I’ve learned some lessons – some the hard way and some from talented fellow decorators.

Redesigning the property I bought near Uzès in Gard was a special challenge. As crazy as it sounds, the property ‘spoke’ to me, almost crying out for help. I just had to have a go at turning it around in order to make it ‘sing’.

## Theory and practice

What particular talents could you bring to the makeover? In my case, my two greatest assets have been following my intuition and thinking outside the box.

When I bought and refurbished this lovely

landmark property, called Le Muguet (‘Lily of the Valley’) and not far from the Pont du Gard, I secured the services of two fabulous decorators from Italy, Dan Blagg and Francesco Bianchini, and paid for them to come to France and weave their magic.

Before I do anything, I ‘listen’ to my new property. Patience is a virtue and often solutions come when you least expect them. I learned this by observing Dan and Francesco. Next, it’s time to summarise your thoughts into words. This doesn’t have to be detailed or

exact, but it does have to be in writing. Mine looked something like this:

Gorgeous medieval historic landmark needs high-level decorator with ‘wow’ factor for several major decorating challenges. Three-month time frame in order to market fractional shares, €10,000 budget using professional services.

Although the remodel was not completed on time or within budget, the finished Le Muguet did meet and exceed our expectations. ■

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# 8 questions to ask yourself before starting a project

## 1 Will the property be your primary residence, a holiday home or an investment for rental?

If you will be living there yourself, you can add personal touches such as quirky signs or family photos, and you may not care too much about the bathroom being updated. However, if the property will be rented or shared, the decor needs to be less personal and the amenities up to date.

## 2 What is your budget for decor?

Personally, I set a budget of around €10,000 for a two- to three-bedroom project in France and I see how far that gets me. I'm quite willing to double that amount if it's required in order to make a property *magnifique!*

## 3 What is your timeframe? Is it realistic?

Be prepared for delays, and then anticipate some more. Then double your estimated time. Expecting delays helps me to make decisions on products that need to be ordered versus ones that I can find easily nearby. I'm forced to be creative, which gives my homes an unusual flair. My favourite places to shop are the *brocante* markets in France but I've also been known to find great bargain buys at *leboncoin.fr* and *truc.com*.

**4 Who will do the work?** Do you plan to do it yourself or hire a contractor or decorator? My most successful projects have been ones where I've shared the work with a second party, such as a handyman who helps me troubleshoot or a decorator with creative ideas.

**5 What furnishings will the property need?** Create a room-by-room list of things the home will need. At times I found this inventory list helpful: *needmorerentals.com/rentals-tips/new-to-renting/a-full-inventory/*.

## 6 Where can you buy what you need?

With a list in hand, I often visit Bricomarché or head to giants like Bricorama, Castorama, Leroy Merlin or Mr. Bricolage which sell all the practical things for internal and external DIY. You'll also find various chain stores on the outskirts of most larger towns in France: Carrefour, Auchan, Leclerc and Darty.

## 7 What will be difficult to find or too expensive in France?

Some things are a lot more expensive in France than in the UK (paint, for example) and it is helpful to do some comparison shopping online in advance. Try Googling items using different country browsers: *google.fr* and *google.it* as well as *google.co.uk*. It may pay to ship something from abroad. In one case I shipped a ready-to-assemble kitchen to France from New York at a cost of €400, well within my budget.

**8 What if you can't find that special object anywhere?** Be patient and flexible. It took me four years of looking in three countries to find the ideal blue oriental rug I was seeking for the *chambre de princesse* at Le Muguet!

# 5 decorating lessons from Dan Blagg and Francesco Bianchini

## 1 Minimise your decorating footprint

Visualise the historical 'stories' of your house and aim to minimise the decorator's presence, instead focusing on showing how it was for generations before you. This was a relatively easy task with Le Muguet as its old-world charm was all there to be seen.

## 2 Embrace serendipitous solutions

There is often a serendipitous event that kickstarts a particular decorating process. We were discussing creating an opening through a plain partition wall between the *salon* and the kitchen, knowing the wall was a problem because it lacked colour and movement in a space otherwise rich with period details. Yet cutting through it didn't seem to be the best solution either. Then, a set of eight engravings caught our eye at a large *brocante* in nearby Carpentras. The subject – portraits of courtiers from the reign of Henry II

of France (1519-1559) – was in line with the origin of the house, a section of the castellated wall of old Vers-Pont-du-Gard with a vaulted stone *salon*, beamed ceilings, spiral staircase and mullioned windows.

## 3 Use a single colour in multiple ways

How to describe the sunny colour that you see so often in market stalls in Provence? Or the colour of those vibrant fabrics, mounds of spices and warm ceramics of Marseille, Anduze and Montpellier? It's a deep, textured yellow, with a hint of burnt sienna, that reminds you of the robust soul of the land and the cheerful approach of its people. The sombre fireplace at Le Muguet found a domestic contentment when its mantelpiece was adorned with yellow platters and its hearth screened with a new ochre curtain. An enamelled vase from Anduze is softening a sharp stone corner, red and yellow *toile* hangs from the windows and yellow lampshades top old petrol lamps.

## 4 Find period pieces to echo the building's character

'French' and 'domestic' became *les mots d'ordre* (watchwords) for all our decorative pickings. A *comptoise* – the French country version of a grandfather clock – was found at a local dealer, adorned with decoration on its pine case. Every French provincial house would invariably have resounded with the ticking and chiming of a similar clock: it seems part of the French provincial DNA, just as with the

old-fashioned petrol lamp, now hanging from the *salon* ceiling. It is still possible to live our modern lives surrounded by objects from the past: a 'Voltaire' chair, still upholstered in its rich green linen velvet, can be as comfortable to snuggle in with a book than anything manufactured today – and the curves of a Louis XV caned chair have no rival in the history of furniture making for its simple elegance. Another happy find was a large wooden panel with a central diamond motif, also a suggestion of the French Renaissance, that has found its home on the hood of a bedroom fireplace.

## 5 Be creative with small spaces

Faced with an ultra-modern 10x10' guest bedroom off the terrace with sliding glass doors, stark overhead track lighting and no storage space, bringing this space into harmony with the rest of the magnificent property was tricky. Again, waiting for inspiration was the key and it came in the form of a subtle blue and white *toile* fabric with a bird theme. Careful measuring meant that a queen-size bed could fit snugly against the back wall and a local upholsterer created a fabric-covered headboard that was hung directly on the wall above, with soft sconces either side for lighting. Enhanced by curtains and walls of buttery yellow paint that coordinate nicely with the stone wall facing the bed, plus a built-in wardrobe that we created by chopping off a bit of the adjoining bathroom, this tiny bedchamber has taken on a spirit of its own!